

Bah Humbug!

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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To live with me is to know that I am prone
to burst into song at any given moment.

I make up little ditties,
often composing my own tunes and the words to go with them.

My nearest and dearest have gotten used to my songs.

But, the other night, when Bob and I wandered into Lowe's hardware store,
it was not a song of my own making on my tongue.

Instead, I started to sing,
"It's the most wonderful time of the year..."

By the time I declared it "the hap-happiest time of the year,"
Bob could tell, from the tone of irony in my voice,
that I was passing some social commentary
on the overwhelming display of holiday lights
and fake Christmas trees, and what seemed to be a petting zoo
of those blow-up Santas and Snow People,
who are three times taller than I am,
and a bit intimidating up close.

It's not that I'm a Scrooge about the holidays.
I truly love this time of year.

It's more the mandatory magic, the manufactured joy,
that's in the air that I sometimes find a bit much.

Especially when the expectations that come with the holidays—
from within or from without—outstrip reality
and sometimes leave us feeling a huge gap
between our internal state
and the outward, festive trappings of the season.

It can feel like failure to confess that
we're just not there.
That we're just not feeling it.

The truth is, joy can't be forced.
It comes in its own time,
and on its own terms.

And, sometimes, it just isn't your season.
Or it just isn't your year.

There can be so many reasons for this.

But I believe they all pretty much boil down to loss.

To grief.

To a reckoning that what used to be is no more,
because someone dear to us is gone,
because someone we loved broke our heart,
or some turn of events has taken from us
a version of this season that maybe used to touch our hearts,
but simply doesn't anymore, at least not as it once did.

We're wished "Happy Holidays,"
but a big "Bah Humbug" is what we might feel.

If you find yourself in this place—
this year or in any still to come—
be gentle and patient with yourself.

My colleague Meg Barnhouse tells the story of her friend James,
who died from cancer, far too young one summer a few years ago.

And she tells the story of her friend
who loved him and deeply grieved his loss.¹

She writes:

¹ "Making it Through" by Meg Barnhouse.

The first Christmas without James,
the whole idea of family, faith, and cheery songs
sung by rosy-cheeked carolers
made her so mad she felt like her hair was on fire.

Her teeth were gnashing and the pain in her heart
clawed to get loose.

One cold afternoon in early December,
she bundled up and marched out the door.

In the biggest box store in town,
lit by fluorescent lights,
trashy canned music making a mockery of the season,
she stomped up and down the aisles
until she saw her Christmas tree.

White plastic needles held on for dear life
to a bent aluminum frame.

Gobs of scabrous fake snow
clumped on a few of the branches.

On a clearance table were a couple of boxes
of dull mud-coloured balls,
a colour between brown and gray.

They were too big for the white tree.
It would look awful.

She dragged her purchases back to the house,
clenched her teeth, and set them up.

The gray-brown balls weighed the tree down;
the whole thing looked downcast...

A few wads of tinsel tossed at it contemptuously
and she was through.

The spectacle gave her an evil satisfaction

every time she passed the living room.

It was ugly, wrong, out of proportion, unbalanced,
bedraggled, and assaulted by clumps of snow,
wads of tinsel, and dull off-colour balls.

[In other words, it was] perfect.

At some point she found... it mirrored her so well.

[In time,] the ironic sense of playing a game with Christmas faded.

The tree was her heart, and her heart was downcast, ... ,
unbalanced, and bedraggled.

One day she went into the room and sat down.
The tree kept her company.

[Somehow, she and that tree] made it through [that] Christmas together...

There are countless ways through this season.

And not all of them conform to tradition, or others' expectations.

It is the way of this world that we accumulate losses along the way.

And when those losses are new,
the holidays can bring a burden that add insult to injury.

When a loved one dies or we go through a bitter break-up,
the arrival of this celebratory season,
when we lift up the gift of human connection,
can be all the more confounding,
leaving people feeling isolated
in the sea of seeming joy that surrounds them.

If this is a burden you are holding personally this year,
my heart goes out to you.

And as raw or numb as you may feel,

I hope you can trust yourself to the wider web of love around you,
and let it help carry you through
what may understandably be a bittersweet season.

And, if this isn't you, you might well recognize the experience
as one you've had in your own time—
or come to appreciate that the calculus at the heart of living
means, in time, you almost certainly will.

Whatever the case, be mindful of those around you
who struggle through this time of year, in general,
or who are struggling through
this season, in particular,
because of a recent loss or the anniversary of a death.

Reach out, without judgment or expectation.
Offer connection.
Resist the impulse to fix.

There is no real cure for grief.
There is only patience and presence,
so let us generous with both.

And, in all of this, for all of us,
because we can sometimes be far too subtle with our affections,
be on the lookout for love,
hold yourself open to connection,
try to notice someone trying to reach out to you.

Robert Fulghum tells the story of the ill-fated year,
when he didn't receive many Christmas cards—
back in the day when sending cards was still the custom.

One fetid February afternoon, [he writes,]
this troublemaking realization actually came to me
out of the back room in my head
that is the source of useless information.

[I] guess I needed some reason to really feel crummy,
so there it was.

But I didn't say anything about it.
I can take it. I am tough.

I won't complain when my cheap friends
don't even care enough to send me a stupid Christmas card.
I can do without love. Right.

The following August, I was nesting in the attic,
trying to establish some order in the mess,
and found stacked in with the holiday decorations
a whole box of unopened greeting cards
from the previous Christmas.

I had tossed them into the box to open at leisure,
and then I ran out of leisure in the shambles
of the usual Christmas panic, so they got caught up
in the bale-it-up-and-stuff-it-in-the-attic-
and-we'll-straighten-it-out-next-year syndrome.

I hauled the box down, and on a hot summer day,
[in the] middle of August, mind you,
in my bathing suit,
sitting in a lawn chair on my deck,
with sun-glasses, cocoa butter, a quart of iced tea,
and a puzzled frame of mind,
I began to open my Christmas cards.

Just to help, I had put a tape of Christmas carols
on the portable stereo and cranked up the volume.

Here it all was.

Angels, snow, Wise Men, candles and pine boughs,
horses and sleighs, the Holy Family, elves and Santa.

Heavy messages about love and joy and peace and goodwill.

If that wasn't enough, there were all those
handwritten messages of affection from my cheap friends
who had, in fact, come through for the holidays.

I cried.

Seldom have I felt so bad and so good at the same time.

So wonderfully rotten, elegantly sad,
and melancholy and nostalgic and all.

As fate always seems to have it,
I was discovered in this condition by a neighbour,
who had been attracted to the scene
by the sound of Christmas caroling.

She laughed.
I showed her the cards.
She cried.

And we had this outrageous Christmas ordeal
right there on my deck in the middle of August,
singing along with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir
to the final mighty strains of “O Holy Night.”

There are countless ways through this season.

And the most satisfying ones involve being aware
of the connections we have with those around us along the way—
and hopefully not some eight months later, and by accident.

Intention and attention can make a world of difference
in how we experience the holidays,
so let us have an abundance of both this year.

As many of you know, I have spent most of my adult life
estranged from my biological family because of my sexual orientation.

There has, through the years, on both sides
been a great deal of pain to process
because of this strain between us.

This has often been especially acute for me at the holidays.

But what made that manageable for me,

what brought about healing
and restored wonder and magic to my holidays,
was creating new traditions that I've built through the years
with what I call my logical family.

There was a time in my life when I couldn't stand hearing the song
"I'll be home for Christmas."

Whenever it would come on the radio,
I would turn the dial or leave the room.

That is what I had to do back then,
when the pain of exile, when my grief,
was simply too much to bear.

But somewhere along the way, something shifted.
And that shift was in my sense of home.

Home was no longer tied to a nostalgic longing
for something that once was but is not anymore.

Instead, today, it is about what I now cherish about this season
with those most dear to me, including you.
What most truly feels like home to my soul.

There are countless ways through this season.

The path you've always taken
doesn't have to be the one you stay on.
And sometimes it simply can't be.

For traditions to actually be meaningful,
they must evolve to remain in alignment
with the realities of our lives.

This means accepting that change is a necessary part of tradition.

It means confronting the expectations
that we or those around us attach to the holidays.

And being willing to let go of what no longer serves.

There can be loss in this, and the real possibility of grief.

But if our holidays are to be meaningful,
they have to match our reality.
They have to be real.

If they're not, what we have may be sweet or sentimental,
but not particularly satisfying.

Darrin McMahon, a professor of history
who has written a history of happiness,
has noted that as our holiday celebrations
have become increasingly secular,
they've become more detached
from the struggle that is a part of life.

Describing Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol,"
he says that "Scrooge, whether he knew it or not,
[when he uttered his dismissive "Bah Humbug"]
was reacting to something new in the 19th century,
Christmas without the religion, just the rejoicing."

A revolution, I will note, that Unitarians
were instrumental in helping to bring about.

As he sees it:

The 19th century witnessed the invention of Christmas
as a time of schmaltzy good cheer
and more secular celebration.

Christians had long marked
the birth of their saviour with glad tidings, of course,
just as Jews had every reason to remember fondly
at Hanukkah a victory over persecution.

But the rejoicing had always been tempered for believers:
The good news of [Jesus]'s birth by his death;
the light of the menorah by the darkness of other trials.

I think he's on to something here.

Joy, when felt in its more mature forms,
involves awareness and gratitude.
An appreciation that things could—
and almost certainly, eventually, will—be different.

This is a life lesson we learn through loss.

And so it is a lesson that many of us carry quietly through this season.

Though there are countless ways through this season,
let ours be the way of patience and gentleness,
the way of intention and attention,
the way of change and evolution.

*

Will you join me in a time of meditation and prayer?

Spirit of Life,
renewed within and among us
in this time when days grow short
and the light dim:

Kindle in us anew the gifts of this sacred season, now upon us.

That from stories born of old,
we might uncover well-worn wisdom for the living of our lives.

That from evergreen and burning embers,
we might recall that even the longest night
is followed by the dawning of a new day.

That from menorah and manger,
we might recognize the miracles in the making all around us:

-the miracle of the very life known to us in the beating of our own hearts

-the miracle of the loved ones who give meaning to our lives

by loving us in spite of ourselves

-the miracle found in the love and compassion,
the forgiveness and reconciliation
that heals hearts grown cold with bitterness or indifference.

May this season renew our spirits
in the knowledge that hope can overcome despair,
that the promise of peace can reign upon the earth
and take hold in the hearts of all.

May that be our gift this season,
to ourselves, to one another, and to our world.

In the name of all that we hold sacred.

Amen.